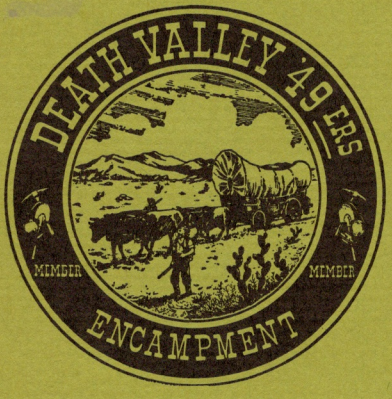
"23" Skidoo
and Panamint, Too!



By George Koenig

KEEPSAKE NO. 11

published for the
22nd DEATH VALLEY '49ers ENCAMPMENT
Death Valley, California
November 11, 12, 13, 14, 1971

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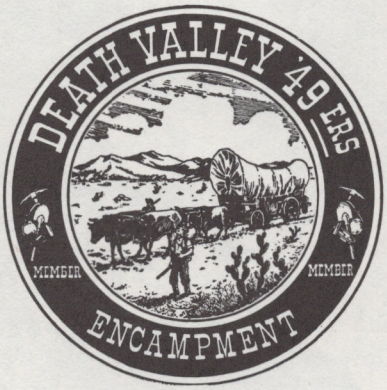
"23" Skidoo
and Panamint, Too!



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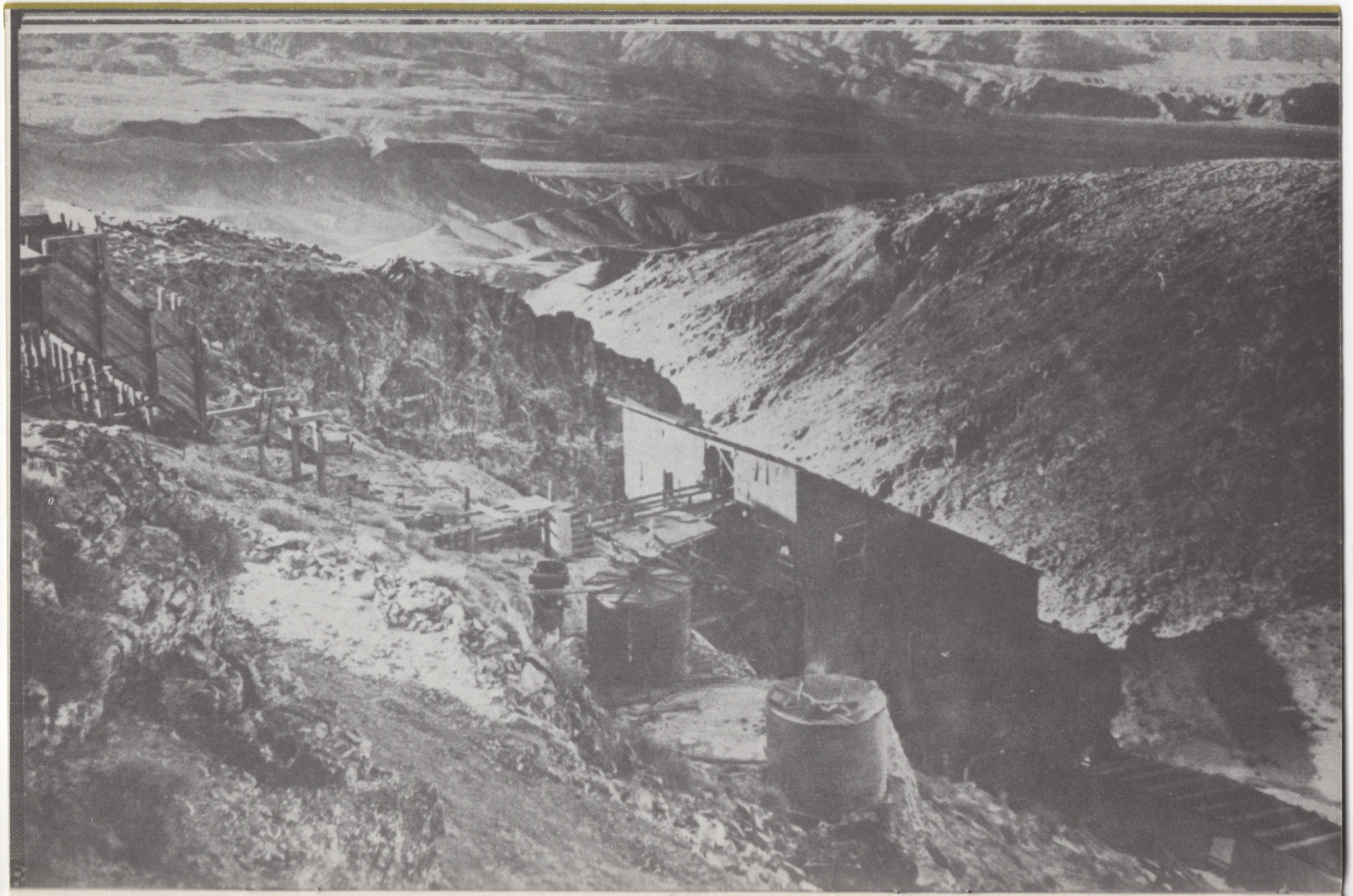

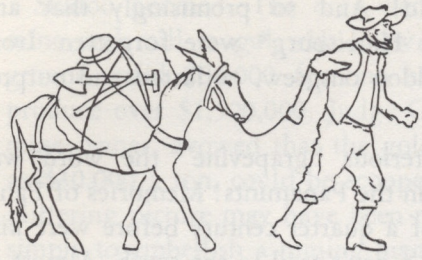

"23" Skidoo!

The lore and legends of most "ghost towns" are clouded by controversy and dimmed by time.

Skidoo, perched high in the Panamints overlooking Death Valley, is no exception. Even its inspirational naming is debatable. Some say it was due to being discovered on the 23rd of the month. Others attribute it to 23 claims in the original locating. Still others credit it to a 23 mile pipeline from Telescope Peak to Skidoo—despite one purist pointing out it was only 22 miles long and another muttering it was scarcely 20. Nevertheless the persistence of "23" inevitably led to the completion of the popular nonsensical saying of the time "23 Skidoo!"

Controversy also prevails as to Skidoo's parentage. Some tout a John Ramsey and his partner, "One Eye" Thompson. Some credit Harry Ramsey, Art Holliday and Frank Flynn. Others give the honor to Steve Hovic, as well as Bob Montgomery of Rhyolite fame. You "place your bets and takes your chances." You have little to lose; for the men, the mines, the town are gone, leaving one opinion as good as another.

Over 5600 feet high up in the Panamints, nestled between Tucki Mountain and Emigrant Pass, Skidoo was spawned by Nevada's last big bonanzas, of Tonopah, Goldfield and Rhyolite. From such as these, prospectors fanned across bare valleys and bleak mountains to the ends of other rainbows—to rumored riches at Greenwater and Schwaub, across Death Valley to Gold Belt and Harrisburg Flat. It was on their way to the latter that Harry Ramsey and "One Eye" Thompson got lost in a fog.*

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* Despite the other contenders, we are inclined to accept these two as the founding fathers, also the fog, on the word of C. B. Glasscock, co-editor and publisher of the Greenwater "Chuckwalla." While his version is not an on the scene report, it was close to being so, both in time and distance.

The Skidoo Mill

Waiting for the fog to lift they checked and chipped away at their granitic surroundings, as is the habit of incurable prospectors — and struck gold! And so promisingly that any thoughts of continuing to Harrisburg* were forgotten. Ironically, what was to be Skidoo outgrew, outlasted and outproduced their original goal.

Over the desert's mysterious "grapevine" the word was heard! Another big strike in the Panamints! Memories of Panamint City's big bonanza of a quarter century before were kindled anew. That was only a day's trail to the south. Almost in a line between was Harrisburg. The lode must be long and strong!

From all directions prospectors left dusty trails. Supply wagons labored over steep grades. Tents mushroomed on the barren slopes of the yet to be named camp.

It would have been easy enough simply to have named it after Ramsey or Montgomery, two of its first residents. Further, both were well known in mining circles, helping to assure publicity to interest investors and claim buyers. Yet such naming seemed rather ordinary for what the citizenry proudly viewed as a most extra-ordinary town.

In the meantime, the search for a name became secondary to a search for water to supply the growing populace, mining needs and a new mill. Needs greater than could be answered by the small springs in and across deeply cleft Emigrant Canyon.

Dreams of millions are not for the meek, so they boldly built a 23 mile pipeline to the abundant waters of towering Telescope Peak, tapping sources that had, coincidentally, also watered Panamint City at its feet.

In a land where water can be as scarce as gold, the event was one to celebrate. "Think of it, boys! All the water you want at your doorstep, from 23 miles away. Yessirree . . . 23 . . . 23 Skidoo!

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* According to desert legend, Harrisburg was to have been named Harrisberry, combining the names of the two discoverers, Shorty Harris and Pete Aguereberry. Perhaps because Shorty was more vocal, and an instinctive promoter, it ended up as Harrisburg.

And so, after much debate and much soul searching, the new town found itself a name.

Skidoo boomed. The ores were rich. Bob Montgomery, a mine and mill mogul who knew his ores from a hole in the ground, paid $60,000 for one of the claims—which was to produce over $1,500,000. Judge Gray of Beatty, and a Skidoo mine owner, avowed that the gold ore, some running as high as $30,000 a ton, could be scooped out in wheelbarrows. This glittering picture may have been meant to dazzle prospects, or simply to embellish a mining man's limitless enthusiasm. Still, between three and six million in gold was reportedly taken out of Skidoo's mines and high-grade pockets.

It is generally conceded that Skidoo was, relatively, one of the most law-abiding camps of the time, comprised of peace-loving folk who would take on any man in the house to prove it.

It had a population of over 700, a post office, a weekly newspaper—the "Skidoo News," three restaurants, two boarding houses, a hardware and seven saloons! It also had a combination store and bank. And the Tucki Consolidated Telephone & Telegraph Co. of Rhyolite strung a line on poles that marched in single file down the Panamints, across Death Valley, and on to Rhyolite where one could get the latest mining stock news. It was one of these poles and the store-bank that were to immortalize Skidoo.

Since it is a tale that has varied with each retelling, let us go back to a quiet Sunday morning in April of 1908, and the eye-witness report by the *"Skidoo News."*

"MURDER IN CAMP
MURDERER LYNCHED
WITH GENERAL APPROVAL

JOE SIMPSON SHOOTS JIM ARNOLD DEAD
AND IS HANGED BY CITIZENS"

"The comparative quiet of Sunday morning was broken by a wild disturbance that resulted in the brutal murder of James Arnold, one of the most prominent citizens of the camp in fact, inasmuch as he located the townsite, and ended in the lynching of his assailant, Joe Simpson, a local saloon-keeper and gun-fighter. . . .

"Simpson, locally known as 'hooch' owing to his fondness for the liquor known by that name, had been indulging in his favorite stimulant for some days and was in a highly inflamed state. Joe was out of funds, a condition not calculated to improve his usual bad temper, and to his disordered imagination the only practical way of getting it was to hold up a bank. For this purpose he entered the Skidoo Trading Company's store, in which the Southern California Bank is located. He immediately covered the cashier, Ralph E. Dobbs, with his gun and demanded twenty dollars under penalty of instant death. . . . A wild rush ensued and before he could carry out his threat he was overpowered. He became so abusive to everyone that Jim Arnold, the manager, eventually put him out of the store by force. . . .

"Holding up a bank is no light offense, despite the proverbial wooliness of mining camps, and further, he was still under a bond of good behavior from the court at Independence, having shot up a hotel there on his last visit. Dwelling on these things, he armed himself with his gun and crossed the street.

"He passed the bank counter and approaching Jim Arnold asked, "Have you got anything against me, Jim?" "No, Joe, I've got nothing against you." "Yes you have—your end has come—prepare to die!" And with that he raised his gun and shot Arnold below the heart. . . .

"An inquest on Arnold's body was held on Monday, the jury returning a verdict, "Killed by gun-shot wound, inflicted by Joe Simpson." Sometime on Wednesday night an armed body of citizens overpowered the sheriff and seized the prisoner and hanged him to a telephone pole. On Thursday, inquest was held on Simpson's body, the jury finding that he "died of strangulation by persons unknown." The body was disposed of. . . .

"Local gunmen are already in a chastened frame of mind. Would-be bad men as they bowl along the road on their triumphal entry of Skidoo will note the number, the stoutness, the great convenience of the telephone poles and reflect thereon. It is a matter of deep regret, but it was the will of the people."

But there was an unpublished sequel to that paper's greatest, and perhaps only, big-news story. A finale that was to distinguish Skidoo from countless counterpart camps where similar events achieved far less lasting notoriety.

The Skidoovians left Joe up all night as a warning to any vengeance-minded friends who might have thought the lynchers a mite hasty. It was also a not too subtle hint to other quick-triggered undesirables, a number of whom were happily missed the next day.

But the telephone line had relayed the news to Rhyolite and beyond. Reporters and photographers hastened across the wastelands to the scene. In a rare gesture of municipal hospitality to the newsmen who had made such a long, hard trip with so little to show for it, they hoisted Joe to the telephone pole once again so that photos could be taken!

Possibly a case could be argued that this was "double jeopardy," making Joe pay twice for the same crime. But Joe did not protest. And any of his sympathetic supporters had already cleared out for less hazardous climes.

But, even then, Joe's body was not to have its final rest. Cut down and reburied, Joe was dug up for the second time when a visiting physician expressed a desire for the skull. On his third planting, Joe was minus his headpiece. So far as is known, he has since been allowed to rest in peace.

For those fond of happier tales, there is that of "Blonde Betty" and the preacher. It's one of Shorty Harris' stories, which means it just might have been stretched a bit. But it matters not. It *could* have happened, very easily.

It seems that "Skagway" Thompson, "as fine a chap as ever drew a cork," passed away. Touched by the sight of the shady ladies from Skidoo's red light row, the only women in camp at that time, strewing wildflowers about the grave, Shorty talked to the traveling preacher who was in town and agreeable to saying a few words at the graveside. It was also decided to have someone sing "Skagway's" favorite song. "Blonde Betty" was selected. In describing her lark-like voice to the preacher, it was deemed best to omit that she was one of the camp's "fallen sparrows."

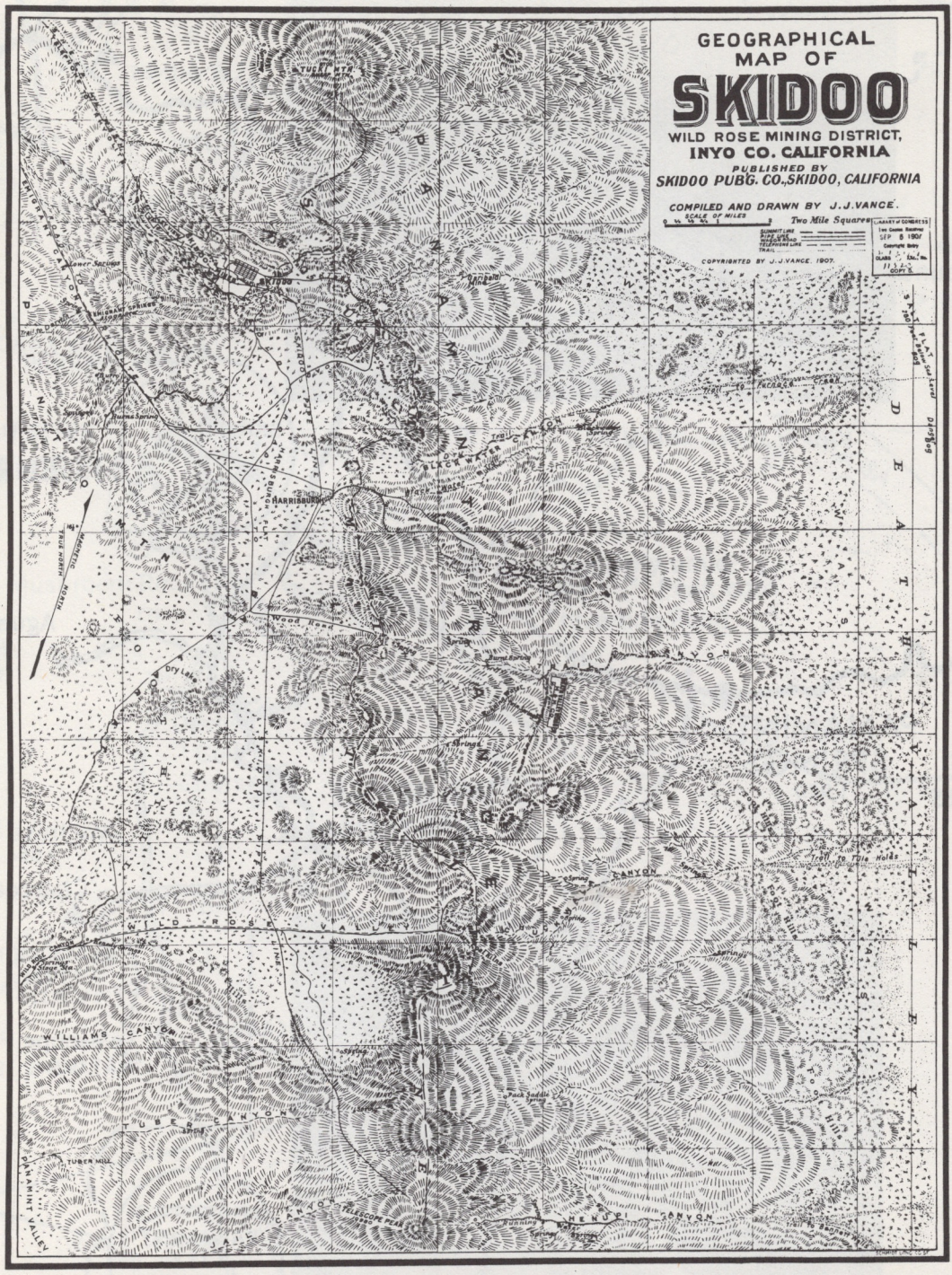
According to Shorty, Blonde Betty was as pretty as a curly ribbon and with the preacher being young and good looking the lass was hustled away as soon as the services were over, lest her sweetly lilting notes be soured by an unfortunate revelation.

But the next day—well, it's Shorty's story, so let's listen to him:

> "The next day I saw her and the Parson picking wildflowers. Of course he didn't know then what she was. After that I reckon he didn't care. He chucked the preaching job and ran off with Betty. But maybe God went along. They got married and live over in Nevada and you couldn't find a happier family or a finer brood of children anywhere."

So it was, in old Skidoo. A time and place that brought out the best and the beast in men. Today, Skidoo rests quietly under peaceful desert skies. Its buildings have disappeared, victims of time, weathering and vandalism. The 23 mile pipeline was salvaged for metal in World War I. The mines, actively worked until about 1917, and spasmodically revived in the 1930's, are deserted and caved in. About all that is left are a few well worn roads and trails to the mining scars of days of old and dreams of gold that went "23 Skidoo!".

INCORPORATED UNDER THE LAWS OF THE TERRITORY OF ARIZONA
103
Skidoo Townsite and Mining Company
This Certifies THAT
Skidoo Townsite and Mining Company, Fully Paid and Non-Assessable,
In Witness Whereof,
Shares $1.00 Each.


GEOGRAPHICAL
MAP OF
SKIDOO
WILD ROSE MINING DISTRICT,
INYO CO. CALIFORNIA
PUBLISHED BY
SKIDOO PUBG. CO., SKIDOO, CALIFORNIA
COMPILED AND DRAWN BY J.J.VANCE.
SCALE OF MILES
Two Mile Squares
COPYRIGHTED BY J.J.VANCE. 1907.
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CLASS
COPY B
SKIDOO
HARRISBURG
Dry Lake
WILLIAMS CANYON
TUBER CANYON
TUBER HILL
PANAMINT VALLEY
TELESCOPE PEAK
DEATH VALLEY

View of Skidoo, about 1907

Buttes

6.6

SAND DUNES

HOTEL

SALT

MOSAIC CANYON

Mounta
365

Tucki Mountain
6,732

SKIDOO
(RUINS)

VISIT
FURNA

EMIGRANT SPRING

Towne Pass
4,956

Aguereb
Poin
6,433

90

18.2

21

PANAMINT
SPRINGS
1,920

ES
ILES

PANAMINT

WILDROSE
STATION
4,160

Wildrose Peal
9,064

Charcoal Ki

Mahogany
Flat
8,133

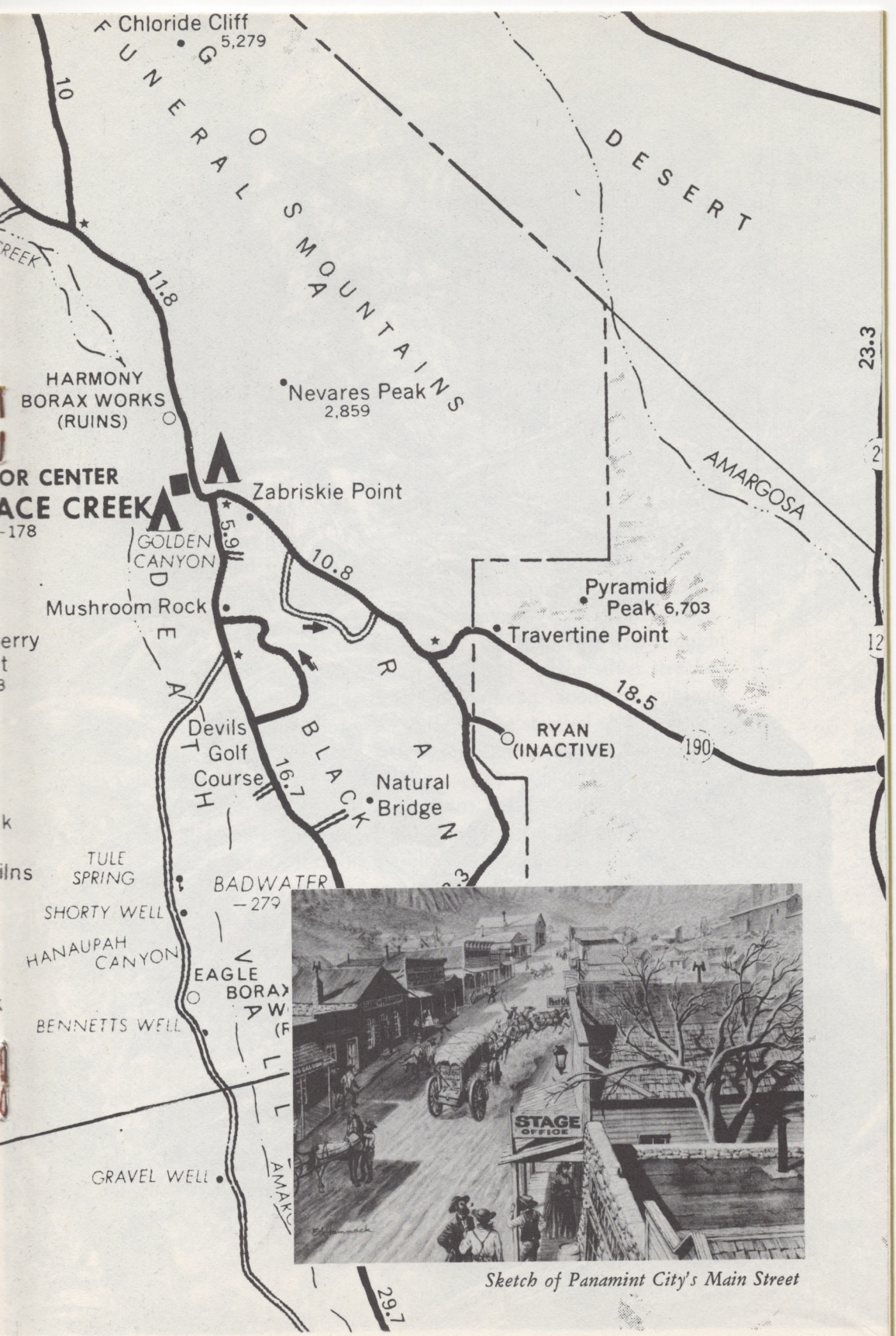
8.8

Telescope Peak
11,049

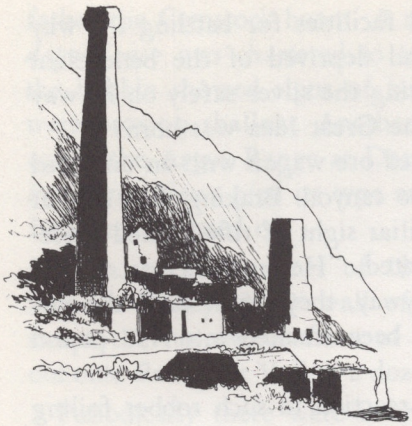
VALLEY

PANAMINT
CITY
(RUINS)

BALLARAT
(SITE)



Sketch of Panamint City's Main Street



Panamint City
—*Suburb of Hell!*

"GREATER THAN THE COMSTOCK!"

To this exultant boast Panamint City was born in 1873.

Hidden high in the slag heap Panamint Range, just west of Death Valley, its birthplace was an area of desolation and isolation that had long provided a natural sanctuary for those fleeing the law. Nestled in a narrow cul de sac valley, its link with the outside world was via narrow, boulder-strewn Surprise Canyon to Panamint Valley, twelve miles away and a mile below.

Little is known of the first miner, or miscreant, who thought he had found the fabled "Lost Gunsight" in the silver streaked ledges. But like wildfire the word spread. Soon the publicity shy inhabitants of Surprise Valley were startled to find a raucous, riotous boomtown where only an occasional rattler had been heard.

From camps in the Cosos, Cerro Gordo and Bodie, Austin and Pioche, a stream of silver seeking humanity surged into Panamint City. It soon acquired a population of 3,000, the promise of a railroad, and a reputation that made many a tough town seem sissyfied. It was so tough that even Wells Fargo shied away from it as a "suburb of hell."

That it was the only town turned down by the Winchester wielding Wells Fargo was due both to its reputation and location.

Surprise Canyon, narrowing at times to six feet, with perpendicular walls and the convulsive bends of a sidewinder, provided a tailor-made ambush at every turn. Hold-up men simply waited at the bottom to relieve the wagons of their sacks of silver, so laboriously mined and conveniently carried down the chasmic canyon.

Sketch of the cloudburst that washed-out Panamint City

Lacking both the forces and facilities for battling the way through the twisting turns, and deprived of the benevolent protection of Wells Fargo, getting the silver safely on its way appeared a lost cause. Until The Great Idea was born!

A few days later an unescorted ore wagon with an unarmed driver snaked its way down the canyon. Braking to a halt at the bottom for the all too familiar sight of rifle-leveled horsemen, the driver cheerfully invited, "Help yourselves, boys!" That being their intentions anyway, they threw back the tarpaulin—to find the silver had been smelted into 450 pound silver balls!

History does not record the reaction to such robber foiling frustration over the problem of transport and disposal of such horseback-breaking loot. Presumably the Bad Men were driven to drink, with instinctively willing spirit, at the nearest saloon.

But Panamint City roared on.

Like dominos, structures lined the one main street of the cliff confined town. Wooden stores and shacks, canvas shelters and some of stone were impartially blanketed by clouds of dust from freight wagons, double-teamed to make the grade.

For Fred Yager's *Dexter Saloon*, a 7' x 12' plate glass mirror was hauled 'round the Horn. Tenderly, almost miraculously, it was transported up the rocky, gutted canyon—only to be shattered in hanging by the helping hands of red-eyed celebrants. Side by side with Joe Harris' lush *Occidental* was the plush *Oriental* of Dave Naegle, who later added a blazing footnote to California's politics by gunning Judge Terry.

Type and press were brought in for the *Panamint News*. Smoke curled skyward, 'round the clock, from Munsinger's Brewery. Lights glowed red along Maiden Lane. The clank of gold coins backed bets in the thousands. Silence only seemed to follow, momentarily, the dispute settling flash of knives and blazing guns. Few paid heed to the creaking butcher wagon pressed into service to unceremoniously carry the losers to the quiet of boot-hill in the short side spur of Sourdough Canyon.

Capitalized to the tune of over 10,000,000 shares of stock in the "Jacobs Wonder Mine," the "Wyoming Consolidated" and the "Hemlock," Panamint City took pride in such backers as Nevada Senators Stewart and Jones, who had helped to

father the Comstock boom. A railroad, the *Los Angeles & Independence* was chartered to tap the Panamint bonanza. But the bubble showed signs of bursting. The mines, while rich, were proving shallow. Another Goddess of Fortune glittered across the Argus Range at Darwin. On October 21, 1875, the *Panamint News* pied its type and bid farewell. Only the True Believers lingered on.

Then, in the summer of 1878, a torrential cloudburst hit Surprise Valley. A 20' wall of water, seeking its only outlet, swept the narrow confines of Panamint City and spewed it out onto Panamint Valley, a dozen miles distant.

Periodically there were attempts to resurrect it. But Panamint City's death knell echoed with the closing of the Bank of California as panic struck the west. More than $90,000,000 of Panamint securities went begging on the market. Except for a few stubborn attempts to turn back the tide with spasmodic activity, Panamint City passed into history.

Today only lonely remnants of stone walls remain as silent survivors of the town that, like Camelot, had a fleeting glimpse of glory when it was, or might have been, "bigger than the Comstock!"

The chimney of Munsinger's brewery still stands and the crumbling smelter still lifts its ornate tower to the sky. But among the laboriously built stone buildings, corrals and fencing, the wild flowers and cactus bloom undisturbed. And where a thousand miners' picks clattered and clanged only the sound of an occasional rock hunter's hammer is heard.

The poker tables over which quick-triggered dealers once reigned lie among the flood scattered debris. An incongruous stillness lies over the Maiden Lane cribs of Madam Martha Camp and her demimondes. And the labyrinthian canyons echo hollowly to the footsteps of infrequent visitors stepping back into the pages of time.

To those who would do so it is surprisingly easy—most of the time.

From Los Angeles, north-south highway #395 and #6 branch off to Trona and Death Valley. From Lone Pine, east-west highway #190, skirting Darwin enroute to Death Valley,

sends a fork south near Panamint Springs. Either approach leads to the Ballarat road 21 miles north of Trona.

Here two miles of graded road leads to the adobe ruins of the once-thriving supply center of Ballarat. From this site, the roadways fan out in a seemingly aimless pattern. If the signs to Panamint City are down, as oft they are, there is invariably someone around to ask for directions.

Shortly after passing the remains of Chris Wicht's old camp, the road becomes increasingly slow and steep, with traction impeded by—wonder of wonders—a delightful stream that occasionally slipperies the bedrock roadbed. Blessed are those who find the road has been recently graded, when it is passable even for passenger cars, be it with occasional pan-jarring jolts. Cursed and cursing will be those who find it, all too frequently, blocked by slides.

Progressing up Surprise Canyon one is indeed pleasantly surprised. The heat of the flatlands disappears. The colorful canyon walls, pock-marked by prospect "test diggings" reveal a rainbow of hues. Verdant spur canyons branch out to the sides. Suddenly the canyon levels and widens to enclose a small, narrow, high-walled valley. There, between the bricked remains of the brewery at one end and the smelter at the other, is Panamint City!

There is a stillness that defies description. Yet, listening closely one can still hear in fancy the shouting, the shooting, the creak of wagons, the thump and roar of the mill, as in yesteryear. From the slopes, amid groves of piñon pine, one can look down along the one main street with its lots and plots outlined in stone. Some still standing roof high, some only in tumbled rubble.

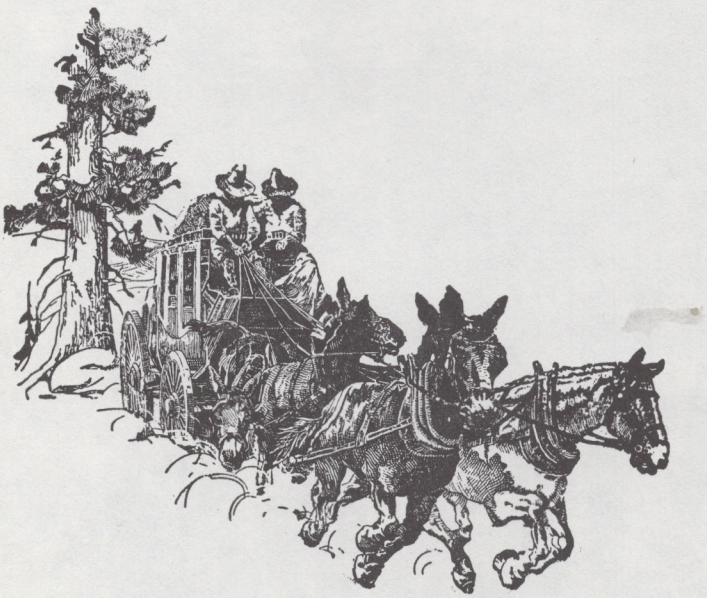
Eastward the Panamint Range rises to a sheer summit of a 9200' ridge separating Panamint City from the Death Valley National Monument boundary, with 11,049' Telescope Peak to the north and 9634' Sentinel Peak to the south. Amid such elevations there is a tang to the air, even in summer, that lightens the step and quickens the spirit. At night the stars are only an arm's length away.

As a place to unwind it is without peer.

Around a campfire the cares of an atomic age are as remote

as Mars. During the day there are rocks and rills to explore and wildflowers in the Spring. To those more venturesome, and sound of wind, there is Frenchman's Canyon with its dimly discerned trail leading southeast over 8000' Panamint Pass and down a steep switchback to Hungry Bill's "ranch" in Johnson Canyon that feeds into Death Valley. Here an orchard and tilled fields, long since abandoned, once supplied produce, worth its weight in silver, to Panamint City.

Spending a day, or several, in Panamint City can leave one with mixed emotions. A desire that no one else will ever discover this hideway from the trials and tribulations of the workaday world—and, conversely, that it could be shared by all as a refuge from a world in which we too often hurry through too harried and harassed to enjoy.



An inquisitive visitor in Panamint City! The mill is marked by the tall brick chimney at center. Surprise Canyon leads to the right—and down —into Panamint Valley.

Panamint News.

VOL. I. PANAMINT, CAL., NOVEMBER 28, 1874. NO. 2.

PANAMINT NEWS.

PUBLISHED TRI-WEEKLY BY THE

Panamint Publishing Company,

AT PANAMINT, INYO COUNTY, CAL.

T. S. HARRIS, MANAGER.

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PANAMINT GEOLOGICALLY CONSIDERED.

EXTRACTS FROM A REPORT ON PANAMINT MINING DISTRICT TO THE UNITED COMMISSIONER OF MINING STATISTICS.

[From the Engineering and Mining Journal.]

NATURAL RESOURCES.

Although the district lies in a barren country, and is rather difficult of access, yet its natural advantages in regard to wood, water and salt are excellent.

GEOLOGY.

Surprise Canyon, from the mouth to the summit of Panamint range, presents a succession of sedimentary metamorphic rocks, elavated, disturbed and transformed by a series of eruptive rocks at various intervals. For two miles from the mouth of the canyon we find a formation of dark-colored mica slates, alternating with quartzitic slates, with little patches of limestone here and there on the tops of the ridges. In proceeding further, we find this slate traversed by dykes of greisen. Greisen is a rock of very rare occurrence, and consists of white crystalline quartz and white lithion mica. Its eruptive nature, which has been doubted by some geologists, becomes here very evident. The rock becomes soon predominant and forms an immense mass, which I estimate to be about half a mile in width. Here, owing to the extreme hardness of the rock, the canyon is very narrow, in places just wide enough for the road. The greisen itself is again perforated by dykes of diorite, which encloses a small formation of crystalline limestone. Then we meet a formation of light-colored, highly metamorphized, quartzitic slates (with mica) which have altogether lost their stratification traversed by dykes of diorite. This is followed by white crystalline limestone of about 1,000 to 1,500 feet in thickness, also containing diorite dykes. Then, again, dark colored metamorphic, quartzitic slates, cut by diorite and diabase dykes, occur for a mile and a half. These carry more or less limestone on the mountain ridges.

THE MINERAL BELT.

The mineral belt of Panamint district extends from west to east two to two and a half miles, and from north to south about five miles. On the north slope of Surprise Canyon, where the formation is more regular, it consists of the following succession of rocks: hornblende slate, crystalline bluish limestone, dark colored limestone, calcareous slate, quartzitic slate, and mica slate, dyke of diorite or diabase, white marble, dark slates, limestone, and then the enormous eruption of the trachyæ. This rock is composed of large crystals of sanidine in a flesh colored feldspathic ground mass, enclosing occasionally crystals of hornblende and dark mica.

FORM OF OCCURRENCE OF ORE.

While in nearly all the limestone districts of Southeast Nevada, as for instance in Cortez, Mineral Hill, Eureka, Reveille and White Pine, the ore occurs in the form of irregular aggregations, no matter if they are defined or not to a certain extent by some wall, or in the form of impregnations in the limestone—as is often the case in White Pine—Panamint district carries its ore in the much desired shape of veins, or, to use the common pleonastic expression, in true fissure veins. I pronounce them veins for the following reasons:

1. Their croppings can be traced without interruption for long distances.
2. There is a well defined system of parallel fissures.
3. These fissures not only traverse the limestone, but continue through the slate.
4. They intersect the country rock independent of the strike and dip of its stratification.
5. The ore is entirely confined to the gangue between the walls of the veins. In no instance did I find even a trace of ore in the limestone. Those who are familiar with the above named districts in Nevada, will remember how the limestone teemed with little croppings and bunches of ore of the most irregular shape.

PROBABILITIES OF THE CONTINUANCE OF THE VEINS AND THE ORE IN DEPTH.

In considering the magnificent geological formation of Surprise Canyon, the regularity of the grand system

[CONCLUDED ON FOURTH PAGE.]

The material for this publication is based upon that from several sources, to which all credit is gratefully given, including:

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and unpublished letters and memories of Mrs. Elizabeth Mecham

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